Tech success:
New info systems enhance customer service at TRS

Like other state agencies, the Teachers Retirement System (TRS) faces the challenge of meeting the demand for higher levels of customer service at a time when resources are scarce.

To bridge the gap, TRS is implementing a multi-year, multi-phase project that involves redesigning its business processes and supporting them with new IT systems.

"As baby boomers began retiring, we saw greater pressures on customer service," said **Greg McQueen, TRS IT director.** "Our staff was working diligently to serve our customers, but they needed some help."

TRS manages retirement accounts for 228,000 teachers at Georgia's public schools and some university system institutions. Each month, it distributes payments totaling $120 million to 56,000 retired educators.

TRS began its Pension Administration Services Solution (PASS) project in 1999 with an in-depth analysis of its business processes. Agency leadership wanted to document how the day-to-day work actually got done. Almost four years later, TRS has simplified and automated many time-consuming, paper-driven processes. It's completed each phase of the project on time and on budget, and it's moving forward with the final phases, which will replace the system used to manage the accounts of active members and make it possible for all members to manage their accounts on a secure Web site.

GTA has supported TRS throughout the PASS project by assisting with the development of requests for proposals (RFPs), participating in evaluating responses and negotiating contracts, and providing project management oversight.

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>
> **Greg McQueen**
> **TRS IT Director**

Bite it off in manageable pieces

TRS spent about one year documenting how work flowed through the agency and designing more efficient alternatives. Then, it established priorities for making changes.

"You've got to bite it off in small, manageable pieces," Mr. McQueen said. "The first piece was our imaging system."

Much of the information about TRS members and retirees was stored on paper. To automate their processes, TRS knew those paper documents would have to be converted to electronic format, and that required a digital imaging system. They got the system up and running in only four months.

"We took a room full of paper file folders and converted them to images," said **Ron Thomas, PASS project manager.** "In total, we converted 9.5 million documents to images."

TRS was then ready to move forward with a new financial system to manage accounts payable, accounts receivable and the general ledger. The system became operational July 1, 2002, and was followed on January 1, 2003, with a payroll system to produce monthly payments for retired educators, replacing TRS' legacy payroll system.

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Bringing the benefits of technology to Georgia state government

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Critical elements: executive support, employee involvement

Mr. McQueen and Mr. Thomas both cited executive support and the involvement of business units as major reasons for the success of each phase. **TRS Executive Director Jeffrey L. Ezell** met with employees to explain the project's impact on the work TRS performs for its customers. In addition, each business unit assigned one person to work full time on the project so IT staff would fully understand the needs of employees who would actually use the systems.

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"Users were involved every step of the way in designing the systems," Mr. McQueen said. "An IT project is doomed to fail if you don't have your business staff on board to support it."

For large projects like PASS, it's also important to find an experienced consultant. "We chose a company with extensive experience in public retirement systems and large-scale systems integration,"

Mr. McQueen said. "We've been extremely pleased with the performance of our consulting partner."

TRS is now focusing on PASS' next phase: a new system to manage the accounts of active members.

It will track contributions and service credits, process refunds and calculate the estimated amount of a member's monthly retirement check. The deadline is June 2004, after which technical support for the legacy system's database will no longer be available.

TRS will then implement new self-service options so members can manage their accounts on the Web or over the telephone.

Mr. McQueen is encouraged by the feedback he's receiving from employees.

"We're not looking for file folders anymore since all the information we need is on our computer screens. We've also freed up space in our office building," he said. "It was very difficult for business managers to see the workflow when it was manual. Now, workflow tools and reporting allow our managers to track work completed, work in progress, and the work to be done." ▊

First–year results
Students with laptops gaining fast

Laptop computers are helping to improve student performance at Georgia middle schools participating in the Wireless Classroom Project. Eighth-grade students are performing even better than anticipated.

"The first year results indicate success at a higher rate than expected," according to an assessment of the project by S. L. Ogletree and Associates, an independent educational consulting and evaluation firm.

Schools participating in the project showed a greater improvement in average test scores than other schools during the 2001-2002 school year. The number of eighth-grade students who met or exceeded the statewide standard for English increased by 13 percentage points at participating schools while the statewide average increased 4 percentage points.

One middle school from each of Georgia's eight education districts participates in the project.
- **Early County Middle School, Blakely**
- **Henderson Middle School, Jackson**
- **Hilsman Middle School, Athens**
- **Louisville Middle School, Louisville**
- **Marshall Middle School, Columbus**
- **Rossville Middle School, Rossville**
- **Treutlen Middle School, Soperton**
- **W. L. Parks Middle School, Atlanta**

In mathematics, the number of eighth-grade students meeting or exceeding the statewide standard increased by 11 percentage points at participating schools while the statewide average increased 6 percentage points.

In reading, the number of eighth-grade students who met or exceeded the statewide standard increased by 3 percentage points at participating schools, and the statewide average fell by 2 percentage points.

The improvement in test scores cannot be attributed entirely to the project since other educational reforms were also implemented. However, almost 72 percent of teachers at participating schools said the project had a positive effect on learning during its first year.

The three-year pilot project began in 2001 at eight schools around the state with the goal of improving academic achievement. The project is supported by $12 million from state lottery funds. The schools were selected because their average student test scores fell below statewide averages. The program uses software from PLATO Learning, Inc., to create an online community connecting teachers, students and parents. PLATO Learning also installed a wireless computer network at each school, and teachers and students were issued a laptop computer that connects to their school's network.

GTA oversees the project and also developed the request for proposal for the competitive bidding that resulted in the selection of PLATO Learning. ∎

Laptop project about more than test scores

Improved test scores tell only part of the story when it comes to the success of Georgia's Wireless Classroom Project.

"We're making changes to the business-as-usual attitude," said Rachel Lyons, technology specialist at Turner County Middle School in Ashburn, at a conference of participating schools in April.

Teachers and administrators from the eight participating schools have met several times during the 2002-2003 school year to share ideas and best practices from the laptop program. And they've told how the project changed their school in ways that can't be measured by standardized tests.

It's brought a new sense of fun and excitement to the classroom. Some teachers create their own Web pages for students to use as part of class work. Students at Rossville Middle School in Rossville use their laptop to create images of their science experiments. They also create timelines of historical periods such as the Middle Ages, then take virtual tours of the periods on the Internet.

"It's increased student interest in learning," said Rossville's Becky Welch.

Kids learn responsibility

Also significant is the way students have enthusiastically taken on the responsibility of caring for an expensive piece of technology.

"Kids guard those laptops with their lives," said Vanessa Biggers, principal of Marshall Middle School in Columbus, where many students come from socially and economically disadvantaged backgrounds. Without the project, most students wouldn't have daily access to computers.

> **"It's a springboard for our school to become one of the premier schools in our county."**
>
> **Vanessa Biggers, Principal Marshall Middle School**

Teachers and administrators at other participating schools see the same sense of ownership among their students. The number of lost or stolen computers has been remarkably low, thanks to a unique security program installed on the computers that renders them useless if they have not logged onto the school's server within a specified number of days. One school reported only two laptops missing out of a total of 733 issued to students. At another school, only one laptop was reported missing. Hilsman Middle School in Athens formed Student Laptop Helpers, a group of volunteer students who provide technical support to help maintain the laptops.

No longer at the bottom

Marshall's test scores are no longer the lowest in the school district, and Ms. Biggers said it's because the school is part of the laptop project. Improved test scores have caught the attention of teachers and administrators at other schools, and they now ask to visit Marshall to see firsthand how laptops make it possible for both teachers and students to achieve more.

"It's a springboard for our school to become one of the premier schools in our county," Ms. Biggers said. Teachers report students are more engaged during the school day as they do assignments and research online. The laptop program is also a catalyst for increased community involvement at Marshall. The program has fueled camaraderie in the school, increased the success of after-school clubs and summer programs, and served as a forum for community leaders.

Web site promotes government accountability

The Office of the State Inspector General (OIG) is using the Internet as a tool to help the citizens of Georgia understand the role of the newly created office.

GTA and the OIG recently worked together to develop and launch a Web site (**www.oig.georgia.gov**) as part of the OIG's approach to promoting government accountability and integrity. The OIG works to hold state officials accountable for efficient, cost-effective government operations and strives to uncover fraud, waste, abuse or other compromising situations. The office uses inquiries, audits, reviews and evaluations to analyze complaints about state departments and agencies.

"With GTA's support in the establishment of this Web site, we will hopefully increase the public's awareness of our mission as mandated by the governor," said Inspector General James Sehorn. "GTA has provided tremendous support to this office for which we are grateful."

Part of georgia.gov, the site offers information about the OIG and its responsibilities and allows users to print out a form for reporting questionable activity. Executive summaries of closed inquiries will be published on the Web site on a continuing basis. The site also features the executive order issued by the governor establishing a code of ethics for executive branch officers and employees. It appears under the heading, "Best Practices for State Employees."

GTA's Teresa Petty and Jeff Kuenn headed up the creative team that designed and built the site. Ms. Petty worked closely with Betty Joiner, executive assistant to the inspector general, to ensure that the site met the needs of the office.

"The OIG is a new office, and we were pleased to help them get off the ground with a site that supports their mission and is easy for people to use," Ms. Petty said.

Ms. Joiner appreciated GTA's ongoing assistance and accessibility during the creation and launch. "Teresa and Jeff demonstrated extreme patience while teaching me how to navigate, edit and maintain our new Web site," she said. "It's great to know that these supportive and competent folks are just a phone call away."

The georgia.gov Contact Center provides critical support to the site by answering users' telephone and e-mail inquiries about using georgia.gov. ∎

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> **Inspector General**

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Hilsman asked a team of teachers to design a survey to assess teacher attitudes and opinions about the project. According to survey results, 75 percent of teachers are "totally committed" to continuing the project after the three-year pilot ends at the close of the 2003-2004 school year. Another team of teachers is making sure the project conforms with the district-wide technology plan so it can be expanded to include other schools. Hilsman also started a mentoring program to help new teachers quickly make laptops a part of their classes.

But giving teachers and students laptops and other technology doesn't improve learning by itself. As Ms. Lyons said, "Without the vision of an inspired teacher, nothing of value will happen." ∎